

The Supervisor — A Functioning Manager!

who are we kidding?

Marion E. Faulkner

The development of supervisors in many southern industries is hindered by the age-old assumptions of people developed in the agricultural south — where the plantation owner was never to be questioned, but always to be obeyed. The resulting autocratic approach to management of organizations and people at work has been carried over into the industrialization of the South. The typical southern industrial organizational structure is still activity oriented and lower management is not geared for achievement of desired results.

III-Defined Role

As a result, the first-line supervisor's role is often ill-defined and vagueness overshadows his authority and responsibility. He is constantly called a part of the

"management team," but is rarely asked to participate or contribute in that role. Yet, he cannot feel a strong alliance with the unit employees — he has been taught well the need for supervisory separatism. His organizational identity is often vague and his potential contribution to the organization virtually untapped.

Attempts have been made to "turn-on" the supervisor with training ventures, development programs and the promise of a promotional progression which, in many cases, has limited probabilities. The supervisor is receiving training in leadership style development, team building, the art of delegation, and participative management techniques. Still, in many cases, the firms' upper-level managers do not practice the arts of

modern management taught to these supervisors. Instead, top management tends to view supervisory training as some sort of magic potion which will cause production to improve.

In many cases, top and middle management are undertrained in the arts of modern management. True delegation and decentralization of authority on a departmental basis is viewed as a threat. The necessary trust and confidence in the supervisor's abilities are not built into the organizational structure and control of the supervisor with modern autocratic techniques is widespread.

This attitude toward supervisors is somewhat puzzling since most organizations seem to recognize that this level of management is one of the keys to maintaining

productivity and morale, while reducing turnover and absenteeism problems. The supervisor's impact on the income statement is now beyond question. The greatest influences on profits and losses occur at the level where the product is being produced. Thus, the supervisor's leadership qualities become translated in dollars and cents.

Too often the supervisor's opinions are not sought on vital departmental decisions and virtually no management participation is allowed. The supervisor is not expected to be achievement oriented, creative or efficient and often feels manipulated and closely controlled. Often management's directive to supervisors in a production lag is to put the "pressure on." A plant manager of a large national corporation recently related, "Our product sells nationwide for less than ten dollars and to maintain that price you must 'crack the whip'." The labor turnover, morale and absenteeism in that plant are shocking.

The first-line supervisor has been influenced by the control structure and often exercises this type management toward his or her workers. The workers, therefore, experience the frustrations of being manipulated and not being allowed to participate in departmental decisions. The increasing demands of workers today are reflective of these frustrations.

Effects of Human Relations

There is good reason to believe that an organization whose members experience a sense of dignity in their jobs will usually be more productive. Sometimes the advantages are quite clear and may result in higher volumes or lower scrap costs. But often it is less tangible and results in ingenuity, cooperation and persistence. It is generally accepted that the productivity advantages of good human relations can be translated to dollars and cents.

If good human relations make a company more efficient, does it not follow that bad human relations can make it less efficient? Indeed it does. Sometimes the bad effects of low morale are much easier to demonstrate than the advantages of high morale. The most common low morale indicators are well known:

(1) *Noneconomic strikes* — characterized by mutual suspicion, mistrust and misunderstanding.

(2) *Excessive turnover* — when job opportunities are abundant then working conditions and environment become critical.

(3) *Excessive absenteeism* — indications of lack of cooperativeness and a sense of belongingness.

(4) *Restriction of output* — the deliberate limitation of output is a cleverly concealed morale indicator.

Good morale in a given workplace is often misunderstood and many managers have not learned to recognize it. Good morale is not marked by the absence of complaints, but rather by the nature of the complaints and the manner in which they are expressed. It is built upon a high degree of respect, trust, and confidence. The first-line supervisor can become the catalyst of this honest openness if properly trained and motivated — and, of course, if the supervisor feels a high degree of trust and respect for the upper organization.

In order to have impact on employee morale and establish norms of high productivity, trust, respect and openness, the supervisor must be carefully selected, be well trained in management and human behavior, and be equipped with authority and responsibility. Upward communications from the supervisor with respectful considerations to his or her suggestions and employee representations are essential.

Obstacles

There are many obstacles which

deter development of good morale when the supervisor has all the necessary qualifications.

(1) There is a naive idea that people respond well to the personal touch — like being called by first names and praised often. All this sweetness is unlikely to do any harm, but neither is it likely to produce any significant change in morale. It cannot be achieved by "saying the right things."

(2) Another naive assumption is that employee attitudes can be bought. Some firms pay high wages and remind employees of this fact when they complain about other aspects of the work.

(3) Good relations with employees are also difficult to achieve because some supervisors, being human, have innate characteristics which make them rather hard to like and trust. Unfortunately, authority brings out the worst in some persons.

(4) There is an unfortunate absence of the real motivators for supervisors and employees alike. This is accompanied by a lack of mutually accepted objectives and rewards from achievement of results.

What About Motivation?

The basics of motivation have been known to modern managers for many years. Either we never really believed in motivation, or the problems of modern day business have occupied our minds to the point of backing off!

Chris Argyris stated in the mid 1950's that the needs of the organization and the needs of the supervisor are in conflict. He feels that every normal person develops from dependence to independence as he or she matures. The individual grows in the direction of wanting to make more decisions for him or herself, of wanting to be more responsible, of wanting to be more competent, and of wanting to exercise this competence. The very structure of the formal business organization exerts pressures in

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opposite directions.

The organization encourages the first-line supervisor to respond to and actively solicit passiveness and submission to authority. Argyris observes that management has traditionally tried to solve such problems as restriction of output, increased absenteeism and turnover, and low morale by getting tough and "tightening down the screws" to bring all subordinates back into line. Such activities intensify the conflict by pushing the first-line supervisor in the opposite direction to that of his normal development.

Argyris's thoughts on development have been supported by the research of Frederick Herzberg who studied the factors which influenced employees to "like" their jobs. The motivators — factors which cause a person to do a better job — were identified as follows:

- *Achievement* — a feeling of personal accomplishment or the feeling of having done a job well.

- *Recognition* — being recognized for doing a job well.

- *Participation* — being personally involved in the work; having some responsibilities for making decisions.

- *Growth* — the opportunity for a challenge in the job; the chance to learn new skills and knowledge.

Hopefully, management has finally begun to understand the human needs of workers. Modern managers understand that employees are not indifferent to wages, but they are not preoccupied with them either. The understanding of external rewards is far advanced to the understanding of internal rewards — both of which are important in job satisfaction. Internal rewards have to do with subjective experiences which enlarge one's self-esteem through increased competence.

Somehow management is overlooking the needs structure of the first-line supervisor — which is similar to the needs of workers.

Self-esteem cannot be maintained in the supervisor by the simple fact that he or she is now a manager. Growth and development occur as a result of motivators available to meet the supervisory need structure. What are those needs? One more time — achievement, recognition, participation and growth.

A medium-sized paper bag manufacturer recently asked for assistance after experiencing 151 per cent labor turnover in an eight month period. The average worker who left employment during that period had 17 days of seniority upon quitting. Personal interviews with the employees and supervisors were conducted in an attempt to uncover some of the reasons for the high rate of turnover. The first apparent discovery was that the supervisors had little authority and responsibility in human activities, but demonstrated a high degree of technical skill. The supervisor did not have the right to hire and fire, had no responsibility for training, and exercised little participation in discipline. The supervisory motivators were not present, nor were the employee motivators.

Organizational Dilemma

The restrictive organizational structure of the southern industrial complex which allowed little participation by the lower level managers has produced a new type of managerial style which might be called an *organization casualty*. This species of manager is a product of control systems, lack of freedom to contribute and a willingness to conform to the corporate system. Here is a typical profile:

Several years ago he was a bright young man, ready to make his mark on the world of business. He probably graduated from a university where he was taught how to manage the total firm — only to find that job already taken. He expected challenge — a chance to prove himself — but found only tightly defined job description and

an organizational norm of compliance. Very likely he has changed jobs several times in the last few years, only to find that each organization is pretty much like the others.

Now, he has learned that few of his personal goals are likely to be met in the organizational setting; and he has decided to adjust accordingly. As a result, he now does what is required of him, avoids trouble and conflicts, takes few risks, and spends most of his time avoiding straightforward dealings with his people. He has become a good organization man, never rocking the boat, nor recommending that things might be done differently.

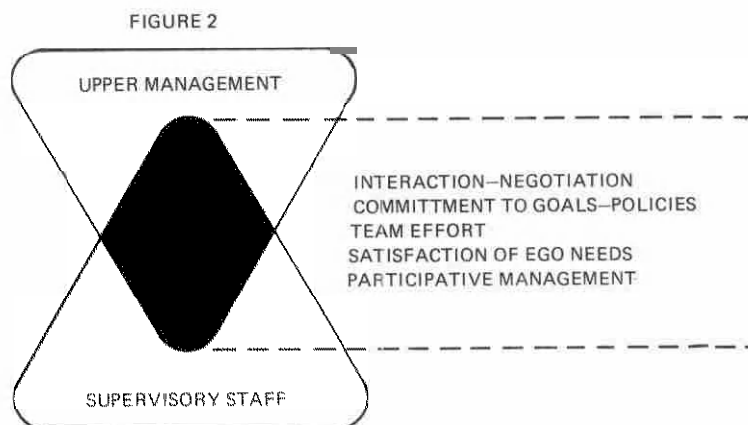
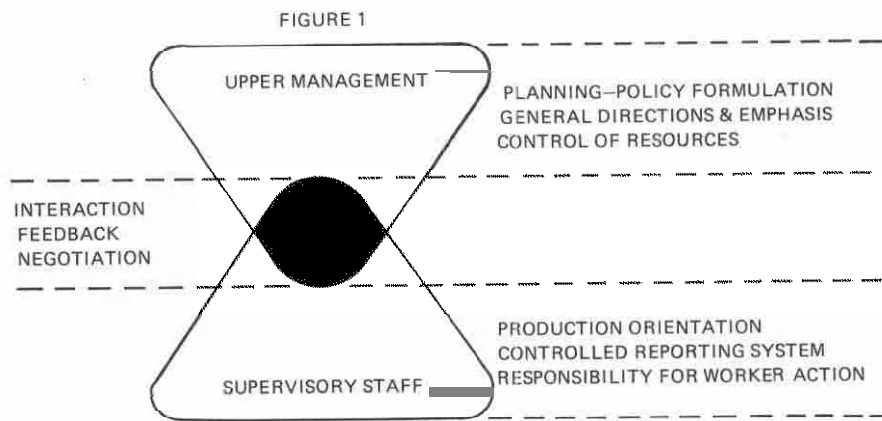
He has long lived with the feeling of being boxed in by the organization and relies heavily on precedent, company policy, buck passing, and the like. He always does only what is necessary to achieve the task at hand.

He is an organization casualty and is used as an example by top management to support its view that a tight organizational structure with little flexibility is most effective.

The case for a tight-control approach to managing a business firm is strongly entrenched and will not be easily given up. Top management assumes that the subordinate managers are happy with the security of unbending policies and conformity to procedures. The assumptions underlying the approach are strongly "Theory X" and are not complimentary of the dedication and possible contribution of the supervisor.

Can Contribution be Achieved?

There is economic, political and social pressure to increase productivity in all phases of our industrial complex. It is one key to curbing inflation and bringing the country back to financial stability. The internal business organization demands greater commitment and contribution from the supervisor-



commitment to a group of goals and objectives which are surrounded with vagueness, unanswered questions and certainly void of supervisory input. How can the supervisor commit a wholehearted attitude to achievement in this atmosphere? In too many cases he or she cannot!

Can supervisory training help? Historically, industry has spent substantial sums on supervisory training in human-relations skills and the results are often disappointing. One of the difficulties is the erroneous management belief in a "cookbook" approach to prescribed "rules of supervision." This is based on the assumption that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to supervise.

The key to successful increases in utilization of human components

lies in the utilization of a well-trained first-line manager who has the authority and responsibility to operate his or her department. The manager should be equipped with a clear cut set of goals and objectives to which he or she has become committed and in which he or she has had a role in establishing. Each goal and objective should be negotiated between the department manager and the upper organization. After all, who has more input to a plan for ultimate departmental contribution than the department manager?

As interaction, feedback and negotiation is experienced by the manager in the goal setting process, commitments should grow stronger. The subordinate manager feels he or she has a piece of the action. The above diagrams

illustrate the growth of the interaction areas.

Figure 1 reflects the traditional limited interaction and feedback between upper management and the production supervisor. Setting objectives, planning and policy formulation were the sole function of top management. The supervisor's role was that of output and keeping employees in line under the dictated production system.

Figure 2 is representative of the more modern approach of feedback, interaction and team effort. The expanded area of negotiation would help to create a sense of value, belongingness and commitments on the part of the lower-level manager. He or she will not get his or her way on every issue but will have the satisfaction of being heard and making a contribution.

The dilemma of better utilization of human resources lies in the lack of self commitment of those resources. The future potential of a workforce which is committed to its own involvement and dedication toward maximizing production is earth shaking. The achievement of maximum utilization of this resource will require ingenuity and flexibility of management.

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Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir:

An article-length letter, "Time Capsules . . . A Year-End Reflection" by Malcolm Campbell was published in the December 1974 *Journal*. The letter was, according to the Editor's note, in reference to my June 1974 *Journal* article, "A Time Capsule . . . Industrial Training 1974." I feel a response is in order.

I advocated the concept that the space utilized for training should be structured to support the learning process. The intent was to be constructively supportive, not manipulative.

It was also my viewpoint that the industrial training scene in 1974 reflected a mixture of both old and new instructional techniques. I suspect that the same condition will exist in 1975 and in every subsequent year until 2024 and beyond. If training is to improve (and I be-

lieve there is never ending opportunity in that direction), then new concepts and techniques must be explored and, in due course, be rejected or accepted based on their merits.

In my opinion, I buried neither a bomb nor treasure. My time capsule was filled with neither fear nor fantasy, but with the realities that surrounded me at the time of writing. I was comfortable with what I observed and recorded. That record included many elements that may not survive the trial of trainer/learner evaluation and comment. Reasonable men and women will make those judgments. In that regard, I consider Mr. Campbell a member of the jury.

Sincerely,

CHESTER S. JANUSZEWSKI